

Looming over all of this, the American people are asking: What the heck does this have to do with “America First?” How does spending years and potentially billions of taxpayer dollars in Venezuela help families pay their rent, their mortgages, their grocery bills, their electric bills, their healthcare bills?

It has nothing to do with it. In fact, it takes money; it takes attention away; it diverts attention away from the No. 1 thing the American people care about: affordability, costs of living, being able to pay the bills of things you very much need.

Bombing Caracas and bragging about oilfields are not going to lower people's rents. Even in this cockamamie plan they have, the money would go back to Venezuela. The American people are saying: That is “America First?” Spend all this time, effort, and dollars getting rid of Maduro and then sending all this oil money back to Venezuela when America needs help?

Threatening Greenland is not going to make groceries cheaper. Military threats against NATO are not going to help families pay the bills. The American people did not sign up for this kind of military adventurism when they voted for Donald Trump, and Republicans who go along will be betraying the American people.

Donald Trump doesn't realize any of this. Why? He is focused on his Big Oil buddies and personal vanity projects like renaming the Kennedy Center and choosing which marble armrests to install.

Just listen to what Donald Trump said yesterday at the Kennedy Center to House Republicans. Once again, he showed everyone he is trapped in a billionaire's bubble. Donald Trump told Republicans, “I wish you could explain to me what the hell is going on with the mind of the public,” because he can't understand why people are souring on his agenda. He can't understand that when you can't pay the groceries or your car breaks down and you can't afford to get it fixed and you can't get to work, that troubles people? He can't understand that?

He doesn't have a clue. He talks to his limited circle of rich friends. They don't have to worry about the things 95 percent of Americans worry about. He is in a bubble, and when Presidents are in bubbles, it is the American people who get hurt.

He cannot wrap his mind around the fact that his very own policies have made life worse for ordinary people. But the average citizen knows it. That is why his numbers are plummeting.

Again, yesterday morning, he slammed “affordability” as a buzzword and said no one knows what it means. Well, he doesn't know what it means because he has enough money to pay for all the things he needs.

Donald Trump, “affordability” is not a buzzword. It is not a con job, and it is not a mystery concept to most people. “Affordability” means you can af-

ford to make trips to the doctor when you or your child is sick. It means you can go to the grocery store and not have to worry: Well, should I buy eggs or cheese or milk? I can't afford all of them.

It means you can pay the rent, pay your mortgage.

What “affordability” doesn't mean is sending helicopters over Caracas and saying we have the right to attack NATO allies. It doesn't mean bailing out Argentine farmers. It doesn't mean giving away critical chips to China so that they can use them against us.

Now, if Donald Trump and Republicans won't focus on lowering the cost of living, Democrats are happy to do it for them. Later today, I am joining with Senators WARREN, SMITH, and KLOBUCHAR and housing experts from around the country to talk about this horrible housing crisis, one of the worst manifestations of rising costs.

Today's housing roundtable is a kickoff event for our Senate Democrats and our cost initiative, which will be our North Star for the year and beyond. We are going to be focused like a laser on the increased costs Americans face to pay the necessary bills that they must pay to live a decent life.

And just as we talked about for months, about helping people to afford healthcare, we are going to continue to focus on helping people pay the rent, keep up with their mortgage, and be able to afford a home for the first time.

In the coming weeks, Senate Democrats are going to lay out the many things Congress could do right now, if only the Republicans were serious about lowering costs, when it comes to food, childcare, energy, home ownership, healthcare, childcare, and more. These are things the American people care about: paying the bills, buying a new car, going on one vacation a year with your family—not invading Venezuela, not invading Colombia, not thinking about invading Greenland.

Donald Trump doesn't get it. He admits he doesn't get it. He doesn't understand why the American people are mad at him when it is as plain as could be.

But Democrats get it. We are going to focus like a laser on costs today, next week, next month, and all year long. The Republicans and Donald Trump will be hearing plenty more from us.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas.

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, we are back for a short workweek, following the holidays, and, boy, is our plate full. But I think it is appropriate to take just a few minutes to reflect on the incredible progress we have made last year under the leadership of President Trump, Senate Majority Leader THUNE, and Speaker MIKE JOHNSON.

Of course, one of the most important things we had to do in the Senate was

to confirm the President's Cabinet and various nominees. Of course, our Democratic colleagues resisted at every turn, requiring that we actually change some of the rules of confirmation to allow the President to fulfill his mandate following his election and to get his team on the field. Democrats not only were sore losers when it came to the election of President Trump, but they wanted to deny him the team he needed in order to actually do what the American people elected him to do.

The most important piece of legislation we passed—actually, there are a couple that come to mind, but one is the working family tax cuts act. I heard the Democratic leader talk about all sorts of “affordability” issues, and, of course, that has now become the buzzword. Affordability is really nothing new in politics, as the Presiding Officer knows. It is all about kitchen table issues. That is what people care the most about. And there are a lot of things that we have already done, without any Democratic help, to try to make life more affordable for working families in Texas, in Nebraska, and across the Nation.

But, obviously, we have a lot of work left to do. First, we have to finish a full year of government funding. Democrats have prevented us from passing normal appropriations bills, which have caused us to lurch from potential shutdown to shutdown. And, indeed, they ultimately pulled that trigger to the detriment of the American people and shut down the government for a historically long period of time.

And for what effect? Well, a lot of people got hurt. A lot of people got inconvenienced. Many people didn't get paid.

And what did the Democrats get? A talking point about healthcare. That is all they care about. They did not care about solving any of these problems, working together in a bipartisan way, which is what I believe we should do, but rather to try to score political points and try to embarrass the Trump administration and Republicans.

But we have to finish that full year of funding because we do have another short-term continuing resolution deadline that expires on January 30. But I know Senator COLLINS, chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, and Senator MURRAY and their counterparts in the House have been working very diligently to try to get the first tranche of appropriations bills across the floor so we can avoid staring another government shutdown in the face on January 30.

Can you imagine how much actual work we could get done if we didn't exhaust ourselves in the fights over shutdowns and lurching from one deadline to the next? Well, maybe that is something we ought to think about, and that is the opportunity cost of going from shutdown to shutdown and all the spending cliffs.

I would hope our Democratic colleagues have learned a lesson from

their last misadventure, which resulted in the shutdown, and I hope they will spare the American people and a lot of folks who didn't get paid, who were inconvenienced, and for no real reason other than to provide them a talking point in the upcoming election.

Again, we are happy to solve problems—that is why we serve here—and even on a bipartisan basis, but we are not interested in government shutdowns, which do nothing but try to advantage the Democratic Party in pursuing a talking point leading to the midterm elections.

We have a lot of things to do between now and November of 2026. On the healthcare front, we offered an alternative to the disaster known as ObamaCare. There is incredible fraud against U.S. taxpayers in the ObamaCare subsidy regime and, particularly, the enhanced subsidies that were bumped up during the Inflation Reduction Act as part of the COVID era.

But, unfortunately, insurance companies got rich, and the American people were not well served when it came to access to their healthcare. And the taxpayers were positively gouged by the fraud and mischief that occurred under the ObamaCare enhanced subsidy regime.

We offered an alternative. President Trump said the money shouldn't go to insurance companies; it ought to go to the consumer, because who knows better than the consumer what they actually need in terms of their health insurance coverage.

But, of course, our Democratic colleagues wouldn't countenance that. They don't actually believe in consumer choice. They don't believe in free enterprise. What they believe in is more government, more expensive government, and we know that is not the answer to the challenges that face working families when it comes to access to healthcare.

Having choice to make a decision, not making young people subsidize old people, not making people buy something they don't need, and not foisting the bill on taxpayers by extravagant subsidies which do nothing but enrich insurance companies.

Well, we know we have got a lot of work to do in that area, and we stand ready to work in good faith to come up with a workable bipartisan solution that will lower the cost of healthcare in the long term, if our Democratic colleagues are willing.

Suffice it to say, we have our work cut out for us, though, in the Senate. While this year has barely started, President Trump has lost no time in defining the year with his usual strength and decisiveness.

You know, back in the Federalist Papers, they debated what the Office of President should look like. And one of the things they talked about is the need for an energetic President and head of the executive branch. And, I must say, that is exactly what we got

with the election of Donald J. Trump to his second term of office—a President who does what he says and is willing and has the courage to act decisively in the face of various threats.

And, of course, the one that is now looming large is Operation Absolute Resolve. This past weekend, in the middle of the night, in Caracas, Venezuela, our brave servicemembers successfully accompanied law enforcement personnel in detaining the illegitimate President of Venezuela, someone who had become the head of a drug cartel and who was working with our most concerning adversaries all around the world, whether it is Cuba, whether it is Iran, whether it is Russia or China.

And, in fact, Venezuela had become a hub for illegal drug trafficking, along with everything else that goes with that. And it also had become a foothold for Iranian terrorist organizations like Hezbollah and was using the money they were able to raise from illicit drug trafficking to then send it to terrorist organizations in the Middle East and to threaten peace around the world.

I want to say that what we saw demonstrated by the U.S. military, working in cooperation with the intelligence community and the Department of Justice and law enforcement personnel, was nothing short of magnificent. It gives me a great deal of pride to know that only the United States could have pulled off such an operation and brought someone so despicable as Nicolas Maduro to justice in a Federal court in Manhattan.

I wanted to thank all of our personnel who participated in the operation. I hope and wish and pray for the speedy recovery of the handful who were injured, and I think it is a proud day for the United States.

It was a challenging decision, I am sure, to make, and there will be many hard days ahead as Venezuela has to correct its course of actions. And under President Rodriguez, hopefully, with the levers that are available to the Trump administration and our friends and allies, they will learn from some of their mistakes and allow a transitional government, which will then be able to represent the hopes and the dreams and the aspirations of the Venezuelan people.

President Trump's New Year's message to friends and enemies could not be more clear. American strength is back, and we will stop at nothing to ensure that the American people are safe from foreign threats and especially here in our own hemisphere.

Walter Russell Meade put it well when he recently wrote:

The operation was a dazzling and magnificent act, and the competence and resolve that it demonstrated will do more to shore up American power and world peace than all the best speeches President Obama ever made.

President Trump has made it clear to dictators around the world that if they try their hands at making mischief, there will be consequences. And I can

guarantee that the illegitimate heads of the governments of Nicaragua, Cuba, and others in the region took note of what the U.S. Government is capable of doing if it is determined to do so under the leadership of a decisive, energetic President like President Trump.

And I think it sends an enormous message of deterrence to adversaries around the world and potential adversaries like China, North Korea, Iran, Russia. When they see a demonstration of competence and professionalism that is really second to none in the world, I think it sends an enormous message of deterrence and helps make our country safer and helps keep the peace.

But, of course, this represents a stark contrast with the status quo under the previous administration. I think that is one of the things that makes this so startling to so many people. After all the words with no action, all the breast-beating about America under President Biden, to see what President Trump is able to do, with the incredible contributions made by the intelligence community, our military, and law enforcement, has got to get the attention of our adversaries around the world. We know, during the Biden administration, the world had become a much more dangerous place because when our adversaries sense weakness, it is actually an incentive for them to act.

I think it has been said before, and I think it is true, that Putin would not have invaded Ukraine again if President Trump had been in office. But with President Biden and then previously with President Obama in office, he knew that paper tigers weren't going to hold them accountable, and so they kept coming and taking whatever they could grab. That makes the world a much more dangerous place.

From the first year of his Presidency, President Biden signaled weakness and incompetence on the world stage, especially with his disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan. His failure to secure the southern border in Texas and in New Mexico and California and Arizona invited the drug trafficking crisis that is continuing to have downstream effects in our country even today. Hundreds of thousands of Americans have lost their lives to the illegal drug trafficking coming across our southern border.

And these failures, of course, do not happen in a vacuum. Our friends and enemies around the world are watching—our friends to see whether they can rely on the United States and our enemies to see whether we will stand up for ourselves and defend our interest and our values. And, of course, that shapes their actions and their decisions.

In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, escalating a war that had started back in 2014 and continues today with massive casualty figures on both sides now ranging into the millions. October 7, 2023, Hamas terrorists,

who are Iranian proxies, launched the deadliest attack in history against the nation of Israel.

And all the while, China prepares for war. They have actually threatened to forcibly take Taiwan. President Xi has ordered the People's Liberation Army to be ready to do so by 2027, of course, escalating tensions in the Indo-Pacific and engaging in provocative joint military exercises with Russia.

Notwithstanding the chaos around the world, America was suffering direct consequences from the drug war, as I alluded to a moment ago. Cartels in Mexico and Latin America took advantage of President Biden's open border policies and refusal to act where action was required. Of course, they made untold millions of dollars selling these drugs and transporting them beyond their borders into the United States, taking countless lives and inflicting untold misery.

Now the Department of Justice has charged Maduro and his coconspirators with transporting tons of cocaine into the United States by moving the drug under the protection of Venezuelan officialdom, including the law enforcement and their military, by providing diplomatic passports to drug traffickers and facilitating diplomatic cover from planes to move drug proceeds from Mexico to Venezuela.

Iran, through its proxy Hezbollah—which operates primarily in Lebanon, north of Israel—they were embedded in Venezuela working with the Maduro administration and helped collaborate to provide those elaborate trafficking networks. And, of course, Hezbollah used the drug trafficking proceeds to finance their own nefarious activities around the world.

Back in 2022, Venezuela signed a 20-year economic cooperation agreement with Iran, the No. 1 state sponsor of international terrorism, an agreement between two of the most heavily sanctioned regimes in the world, all designed to defy the United States and expand their criminal enterprise.

In a hearing before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control that I chaired late last year, one of our witnesses described Venezuela as playing a very important role in what they called the “axis of evasion,” a global sanctions-defying network that also includes Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea.

And, of course, Maduro was an important part of that within this “axis of evasion” because he is the one that gave them a foothold in our backyard in the Western Hemisphere.

And, of course, all of this went on during the Biden administration and right under their nose, but they did nothing—virtually nothing—about it. President Biden and Secretary Mayorkas turned a blind eye, allowing these illicit happenings to continue while drugs poured into the United States and totalitarian dictators and terrorists enriched themselves and spread their misery.

But President Trump has now begun to turn the tide. He began on day one of his administration with an aggressive immigration enforcement, rounding up and deporting members of MS-13, one of the most dangerous gangs in the world; Tren de Aragua, another dangerous Venezuelan gang; and other criminal networks who had set up shop here in the United States in our neighborhoods and in our communities.

Given the vast networks of these international gangs, it became clear to President Trump that it was not enough to simply send them back from where they came so they could regroup and reorganize. President Trump and Secretary Rubio and President Trump's administration, rightly, determined that further action was necessary. And, of course, that began, most notably, with a series of strikes on drug boats in the Caribbean designed to deter the cartels and disrupt their evil trade.

Now, by capturing Maduro, by enforcing an indictment made by a U.S. grand jury in a Federal court in Manhattan, President Trump has shown, without a doubt, that he means business.

Of course, the radical left is losing their mind, as they usually do every time President Trump acts decisively and with boldness. Protestors outside the courthouse held signs reading “Free President Nicolas Maduro” and “Hands Off Venezuela.”

I guess any jurisdiction that would elect a new mayor like a democratic socialist, Mamdani, that is probably what you would expect. So I don't think anyone was surprised.

But the message of Operation Absolute Resolve to our allies and adversaries around the world could not be more clear: America is back. The Trump administration will act with boldness and decisiveness. And if you threaten the American people with drugs or terrorism or any other sort of criminal or military attack, you better watch your back because you could be next.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. COTTON. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

VENEZUELA

Mr. COTTON. Mr. President, today is a great day in America. Nicolas Maduro—an indicted drug trafficker, an illegitimate communist dictator who has the blood of hundreds of Arkansans and thousands of Americans on his hands—is behind bars in a prison in New York. Again, he was an illegitimate communist dictator, in league with all of America's enemies around the world.

With the Venezuelan people crushed underneath his iron fist for years, Maduro turned the country into a crossroads and a playground for the likes of communist China, Cuba, Iran, Russia, and even Islamic terrorists like Hezbollah.

I want to take this opportunity to commend the exceptional skill and bravery of our troops, CIA officers, and FBI agents for executing such an amazing military and intelligence operation that brought Maduro's reign to an abrupt end. It is impossible to overstate the complexity of this mission. But for our troops and our intelligence officers—whose skill, professionalism, and bravery are unmatched in the world—“impossible” isn't in their vocabulary.

I also commend President Trump for having the courage to take bold, decisive, and audacious action against Nicolas Maduro. This action was well within the President's constitutional authority. The operation was in keeping with President Bush's operation to arrest the drug lord and Panamanian President Manuel Noriega, in 1989. If anything, Maduro was much worse than Noriega, and Venezuela now is even more vital strategically than Panama was then.

Additionally, this operation did not violate the War Powers Resolution. Even if you believe the War Powers Resolution is constitutional, these troops were in and out of Venezuela in a couple of hours.

Only the United States could execute such a dangerous and difficult mission without the loss of a single American life. But instead of celebrating Maduro's ouster and America's success, our Democratic colleagues are determined to condemn the operation, all because President Trump ordered it.

Consider that, in 2020, Senator SCHUMER criticized President Trump for bragging “about his Venezuela policy” but failing to bring “an end to the Maduro regime.” It sounds like a call for regime change to me, just like Joe Biden's decision to increase the bounty on Maduro's head seems like a call for Maduro to be apprehended and brought to justice. Yet when President Trump did exactly that last weekend, Senator SCHUMER said this is “reckless.”

Also, consider Senator MURPHY, who said, in 2019:

Getting rid of Maduro is good for the United States.

I agree. Unfortunately, he has changed his tune lately. The day after Maduro's capture, Senator MURPHY said:

The invasion of Venezuela has nothing to do with American security.

Nothing.

He further said:

Venezuela is not a security threat to the [United States].

I disagree. I think it has more than a little to do with our national security and our safety. I have heard from too many Arkansas mothers and fathers whose children have died because of a